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On Capturing the Nostalgia of Sweetness: Sculpting Sugar

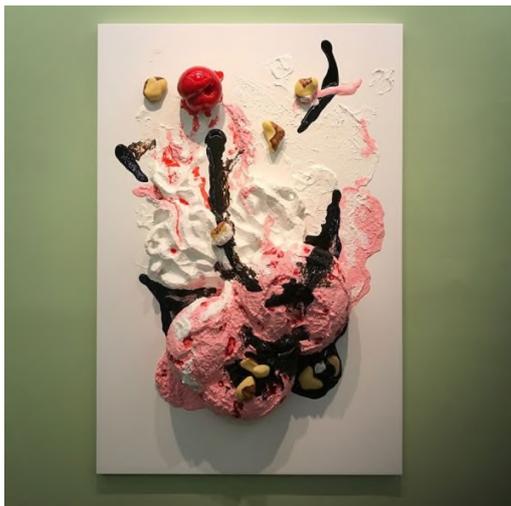
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In the exhibition *Sugartarium* (2017), artist Peter Anton explores our deepest dependence on sugar through an explosively colorful collection of mixed-media sculptures depicting oversized childhood sweets. Anton's work undoubtedly tugs at standardised visions of alimentary nostalgia; you can almost smell the sugar in the air. One would expect such an exhibition to be focused on celebrating sugar, however, Anton's collection showcases a debatably more dark and sinister side to sweetness: addiction and obsession. Anton describes *Sugartarium* as a way of exploring "the uncontrollable and insanely addictive hold sugar has on us".

Situated in the UNIX Gallery in Manhattan, New York, the exhibition is designed as a glimpse into an asylum dedicated to treating the dessertfully-deranged. Visitors creep through a "broken" window to find themselves among rooms displaying differing forms of treatment for sugar addiction. As you walk by hospital beds, child-sized muppet dolls are strapped down as a part of their treatment as a nurse sweeps up piles of loose rainbow sprinkles. On some days, human "patients" are seen cradling said muppet dolls while interacting with numerous types of sugary tweets as objects of play as the artist, isolated behind glass in an observational room, observes their process of treatment.





In the adjacent rooms, the sugary sculptures are displayed in overly magnified and physically deconstructed forms. Through crushing, smearing, splattering, or breaking, each sculpture is manipulated to exemplify its unique textural qualities. These highly-detailed sugary sculptures are constructed using a variety of carefully selected components: resin, wood, plaster, clay, aluminium, as well as acrylic and oil paints. These media are reimagined into some of the most recognizable confections. Some of the sights include fluffy yellow confetti cake with rainbow sprinkles and fluorescent pink frosting, crumbly macarons, an oversized partially cracked milk chocolate Easter bunny, a juicy slice of pie, as well as an elaborately topped ice cream sundae. The overall concept of the exhibition is as relatable as it is eerie through its invoking of the consideration for sugar's prowess in dictating individual sanity. Are we more than what we eat? Does temptation tamper with our lucidity? Is our love for sweetness harmless or something darker?

As overnutrition continues to plague many societies across the world and rates of obesity continue to rise, one might wonder how we got to this point. Whether its nutrition transition, or the notion of obesogenic environments, the collective growth of waistbands across the globe does not burgeon from a singular etiology, rather it manifests in the overlaps of numerous factors. *Sugartarium* forces us to confront our volatile relationship with our bodies and to recognize that issues associated with obesity are not solely those of the individual and that culpability is encapsulated within multiple levels of the food system. He posits that we are living in a reality in which sugar is the driving mechanism of our choices and innermost motivations. Including elements of Cartesian mind-body dualism, he touches upon the ways in which sugar effects our physiology and mental wellness and plays upon sugar-induced delirium.

The exhibit, in its title and conception, references the historical use of sanitarium centers for the treatment of long-term illnesses, especially tuberculosis. Anton draws upon the complex, long-term relationship many of us may have with sugar and emphasizes its toxic and debilitating nature. Anton aptly shifts a narrative of innocence and joy to one of anxiety and self-preservation against an imminent threat. What Peter Anton accomplishes with *Sugartarium* is the outward declaration and display of the manipulation (and inevitable destruction) of the individual; a gradual decay of health from numerous angles. *Sugartarium* exemplifies the inherent dangers lurking within familiar foodstuffs that populate our "pleasurable" and benevolent memories of foods that have followed us throughout our lives. *Sugartarium* unearths the uncomfortable truth about the oversaturation of the foodscape with sugar-filled food and food products. It shines a light on the importance of accountability in making food choices; our love for sugar, though riddled with nostalgia, is killing us. While some of *Sugartarium* may be considered hyperbolic and absurdist in nature, its guiding principle of a need to approach issues of obesity, sugar addiction and food addiction more rigorously, is firmly grounded in reality.